



Alice Dunbar Nelson

Biography

Alice Dunbar Nelson was born Alice Ruth Moore into the Creole society of New Orleans in 1875. Although most often labeled African American, Dunbar Nelson can easily be considered multiracial. Her mother was a mixture of African American and Native American; her father, it is presumed by scholars such as Gloria Hull, must have had a “considerable” amount of Caucasian blood in his make-up, if indeed he were not completely Caucasian. As Dunbar Nelson’s chief biographer, Hull also intimates that perhaps other “shameful” aspects -- such as illegitimacy -- surrounded the event of Dunbar Nelson’s birth (34-35).

In any case, Dunbar Nelson spends a good deal of time hinting at issues of identity in her writing and even devotes some short stories completely to the theme. While there is no doubt that Dunbar Nelson freely affiliated herself with the Negro race, there also seems to be little doubt that she prided herself on her fair skin and her mixed features, almost seeing herself as a step above other, darker African Americans because of the physical differences. One feels that sense of difference in a very definite way in the author’s work.

Early on in her career, the then twenty year-old Alice Moore published a volume of short stories and poetry entitled “Violets and Other Tales.” Within this collection is the much anthologized “Sister Josepha.” While there are no blatant references to mixed race in this short story, there certainly exists a struggle for identity and a definite hint toward the mixed blood of Sister Josepha, who comes to the convent at the age of three, with only the name Camille. Other short stories written by Dunbar Nelson at the turn of the century include similar themes of identity, delving into issues of crossing the color line. Most notable are “The Stones of the Village” and “The Pearl in the Oyster.”

Quick Facts

- * 1875-1935
- * Multiracial fiction writer and key figure of the Harlem Renaissance
- * Identified herself as a member of the Negro race



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Biography continued

Alice Dunbar Nelson is widely known as having been the wife of the poet Paul Laurence Dunbar. Their marriage began in 1898 and ended after only four years. Even after a happy remarriage to Robert Nelson, Dunbar Nelson continued to use Dunbar as part of her name. Like her famous first husband, Dunbar Nelson became a prominent poetry figure during the Harlem Renaissance, publishing in such famous African American magazines as *The Crisis* and in several poetry anthologies.

Still, it is her fiction that shows Dunbar Nelson's passions and breadth the most. A second collection, "The Goodness of St. Rocque and Other Stories," considered by many to be her best work, continues with many of the multicultural themes seen in "Violets," although Dunbar Nelson's fashionable adeptness with local color shows through much more distinctly in *St. Rocque*.

In addition to her poetry and short stories, Dunbar Nelson began at least three novels, wrote several scholarly essays, and kept an extensive diary. Her unfinished novels have been recently published by the Schomburg Library, and her diaries have been compiled into the edition *Give Us Each Day*, edited by Gloria Hull.

Alice Dunbar Nelson filled her life with much more than writing. She was also a teacher, a public speaker, and an activist, fighting for increased educational opportunities for African Americans, fighting for the cause of women's suffrage, and fighting against the rampant lynching activity taking place in the country at the time. Her social activism seemed to serve as an anchor for her in a world where, through her writings at least, questions were more often toiled over than answered.

As Dunbar Nelson writes in her short story "Sister Josepha," "No name but Camille, that was true; no nationality, for she could never tell from whom or whence she came. . . . In a flash she realized the deception of the life she would lead, and the cruel self-torture of wonder at her own identity. Already, as if in anticipation of the world's questionings, she was asking herself, 'Who am I? What am I?'"



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Selected Bibliography

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